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NOT ALWAYS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY - THE AMERICAN - Seattle Times, The (WA) - August 9, 1987 - page A1
August 9, 1987 | Seattle Times, The (WA) | CAROL M. OSTROM | Page A1

In one long, hot day in Seattle, **Nai Vang Saeturn** learned much _ too much _ about America.

The first lesson was a gift. Strangers can be kind, Nai Vang found, as a friendly woman, not put off by dark skin or unfamiliar accents, rescued him and his friends, stranded in the North End.

Refusing offers of money, she drove them back home to the Central Area.

Strangers would help a young man like Nai Vang. A quiet, almost shy 26-year-old Mien refugee from Laos, Nai Vang never raised his voice in anger and always tried to settle disputes. He liked to help handicapped people and often carried his Bible, studying the faith that had helped bring him through the years of war in Laos and months of waiting in a refugee camp.

With his frightened family _ unschooled highland farmers from the minority Mien group _ he prayed to come to America, the land of opportunity where finally they could be safe.

In Seattle, the Saeturn family found a few opportunities _ Nai Vang landed a job as a part-time janitor _ and many dreams. In the refugee camp, Nai Vang had taught himself to read Thai, not an easy accomplishment for the Mien people (also known as the Yao), who didn't have a written language until 1950.

And although Nai Vang (pronounced Nye Wong) wasn't proficient in English yet, the Christian Mien community felt that one day he could become the first Mien minister for their budding church, if only they could find the money to send him to religion classes.

``He could tell what stories to teach from the Bible,'' recalled his uncle, also a member of the church. ``Everyone amazed about that. That's why they decided to let him go to Bible school. We think maybe later he can learn better English and learn better Bible.''

Some of the elders of the church began to meet to see whether they could find ways of turning the dream into a reality.

Dreams and even opportunities, though, seemed to come more easily than safety for Nai Vang's family. They weren't afraid of the families who lived in their apartment house, a shabby, crowded building near Garfield High School.

But outside the building, it was a different story. Things weren't bad in the early '80s, residents said, but for the past few years, the many Mien families living there have been trying to fend off attacks from neighborhood toughs. As they watched helplessly out the windows, rowdy kids tried to steal their cars, broke their windows and occasionally beat up someone. Once a resident angrily watched kids trying to break into his car, then shot at them _ with his slingshot.

It was just a few blocks from there, close to what everyone nearby knows is a house where drugs are sold, that Nai Vang learned his last lesson: America is beautiful, but it is very, very dangerous, like the sleek, stalking tigers that roam the jungles of Laos.

At about 10:30 that night last May, Nai Vang walked back from a neighborhood corner grocery to his parents' little apartment, carrying a bag of ice and cola, a treat for the friends who had helped him when he had car trouble earlier in the day.

But Nai Vang never made it home. As he walked down the sidewalk, the slightly built refugee was stabbed again and again by an unknown assailant. Pushing himself along the concrete, he made it a few dozen feet before he collapsed. Finally, someone called the police, and by the time his mother, Fahm Finh Saechao, found him, he was surrounded by the lights of the police cars and ambulance.

As he lay bleeding on the sidewalk, Nai Vang looked silently at his mother, who tried to get close to him. But the police, who may not have realized she was his mother, barred her from getting closer or from going with him to the hospital. She speaks virtually no English, and isn't sure whether the other bystanders explained who she was to the police.

So as the ambulance rushed Nai Vang to Harborview Medical Center, she went back to their apartment, explaining what had happened as best she could to her husband, who was cooking dinner for Nai Vang and his friends.

No one there could drive, and besides, she explained through another son, she believed the police had told her to stay and wait for the hospital to call. So she waited, sleepless, as the night passed.

Finally, toward morning, the call came, telling them to come to the hospital. There, they were told that their son had died, only a few hours after he was stabbed.

A MIEN EXODUS

The manager of the apartment building where Nai Vang's family lived is a slight man with a wry sense of humor. But he has found nothing much to laugh at in the past few months.

Since Nai Vang died, his family and other residents have moved out. After the last of the 18 Mien families move this month, the manager will leave, too, he said.

Because they cannot all go to the same place, the Mien are scattering around the city. For the old people, most of whom cannot speak English, drive or walk far, being separated is very difficult.

They want to live together so they can help each other, the manager explained.

``People ask me, `Can we stay here forever?' I tell them I don't think we can,'' said the manager, who asked that his name not be used. ``Inside it's safe but outside it's really scary.''

Five years ago, the windows on the apartment-house doors were covered with a heavy wire mesh to keep them from being broken. Now, the manager has bolted large metal brackets on each door inside. At night, he slides a two-by-four into the brackets to keep the doors secure.

``There are many troubles around here,'' said a Mien apartment resident. ``Usually, they try to break the windows, get inside the building, but no kill, no murder. But this time, it is worse, really worse.''

Just a few days after Nai Vang was killed, there was another incident that badly frightened the people in the building.

A TEEN ATTACK

Some Mien young people were playing a native game across the street, kicking a bamboo ball across a net, when a dispute arose with some neighborhood teen-agers. The teens, the apartment manager said, attacked one of the Mien, breaking a bottle on his head and kicking and hitting him in the head. He was rescued by another Mien man, who fended off the attackers with a garbage can and helped him inside the apartment.

As three young men held the door from the inside, the angry teen-agers _ who sometimes numbered as many as 20, apartment residents said, tried over and over that night to break it down.

Inside on the landing, a few stairsteps above the door, many of the apartment residents waited, armed with kitchen knives and sticks, prepared to fight back.

``If they break down the door coming in, then they must die in hallway,'' a resident said.

The attacks finally stopped early in the morning, after the police had been called several times. ``People were scared. They stayed up all night,'' the resident recalled.

Several times, the police came, but the teens would disappear, folding into a group of about 200 others hanging out on the Garfield playfield. ``Many times after that we are calling, calling. That night the police never came any more,'' the manager said.

Soon after that night, several apartment residents met with police, along with Cal Uomoto, director of the Indochinese Farm Project, who has become a friend and adviser to the Mien people. About 800 Mien live in Seattle, a relatively small number compared to other Southeast Asian refugees.

The police explained that there had been another emergency that evening, said the manager, who adds that the police have been quicker to respond since then.

``This has been happening for about five years,'' said Uomoto, who describes the Mien refugees as a ``besieged community'' in that tough neighborhood. ``It's sort of too bad that it's taken this long, somebody getting killed, for something to happen.''

Neither the police nor the refugees, however, believe the violence has racist tones. The neighborhood teens are ready for trouble, and the small-of-stature Mien people are just, as one police detective puts it, ``easy pickings.''

Typically, they move into the cheapest housing in the inner city, often near established drug-dealing activities.

Everyone in the apartment near Garfield knew the street was dangerous at night, the manager said. There is another small grocery nearby, and on his first trip to get drinks for his friends that night, Nai Vang went there. But when he got back to the house, his mother reminded him that one friend didn't drink beer, so he went back to buy some pop.

Perhaps he felt silly returning to the first store; perhaps he just felt like taking a different route. Perhaps he was curious about what goes on at the house down the street, where cars come and go at all hours and sentries are posted on the street corners.

Police say they don't connect Nai Vang's death with gangs, drug-selling, or with racist motives. He was just there, they say, he was carrying money (his uncle said he'd been paid that day), and he was small _ 112 pounds.

``It was an opportunity to get something from someone who looked like he couldn't do anything about it,'' said a Seattle Police Department victims-assistance officer who works with refugees.

Lt. John Gray of the department's homicide division says Nai Vang's murder is under investigation. ``He was an innocent victim,'' says Gray, ``and it was a senseless murder.''

MEMORIES OLD AND NEW

In Nai Vang's parents' new apartment, a pitchfork stands in the corner by the front door. In Laos, in the mountains, they were farmers.

But now, in the dilapidated ground-level apartment with torn curtains on Martin Luther King Jr. Way, they spend more time worrying about what seem like endless attempted burglaries than they do about farming. They hope to get access to a nearby plot of land soon, though, where they can raise vegetables.

On the wall, his parents have pinned a copy of Nai Vang's Social Security card and his immigration ``green card.'' Above the doorway, a picture of their son and a friend, accompanied by another young boy, is displayed with plastic flowers like a shrine.

With his family, **Nai Vang Saeturn** lived through much turmoil in Laos.

Speaking through his youngest son, Sarn Vang, Nai Vang's father remembers how the soldiers used to stride down the streets of their mountain village, three days' walk from a city, often taking Mien men away to join their ranks. They were always afraid when the Communists came to their villages, he explained.

``When they come to town, when they know who is the smart one, they took that man, they tell him to dig a hole and then they shoot him and they bury him in that hole. . . . That's why we come to America.''

A small, compact man, he wears a blue beret and sits on a very short stool, as is the custom. His wife, sitting beside him, excitedly describes their last years in Southeast Asia. ``We could hear the bullets flying over our heads,'' she said, through Sarn Vang.

In 1975 his family left the country, living for about five years in Thailand, about a year of that in a refugee camp.

When they finally decided to come to this country, they were helped by Nai Vang's uncle, Yao Hang Saeturn, who was a soldier in Laos and helped the CIA.

Yao Hang has done well, learning English and now working for the Seattle-King County Health Department's Refugee Screening Program.

He is a man who places a high value on hard work, and he was proud of his nephew.

``In our country, he did not go to school,'' he recalled, because his parents didn't allow him to go. ``A lot of people say when the kids go to school they just become lazy and they don't do any good.''

But Nai Vang was smart, and learned on his own. He could read his Bible in Thai and translate in Mien for the old people, which was important for the families belonging to the Mien church, a small group that meets in the Japanese Presbyterian Church.

``The older people, they cannot speak any English. That's why we have to speak our language at our church,'' explained another elder of the church. And Nai Vang, with a talent for helping people and also for leading songs that help connect the older people with their church, was just what the church group needed, the elder said.

WORKING FOR GOD

``He know God,'' he said. ``He say we have to help God to do things. He was the one who really happy to work for God.''

Nai Vang, the elder said, was a good leader, working hard and keeping the records for the church paper. ``Now,'' he said, ``we have to start over.''

What is hard for Nai Vang's family to understand is the apparently random violence that took their son. In Laos, it was dangerous, but there was a war. There were the people they called ``enemies.''

America is not at war, and Nai Vang had no enemies, his mother said. ``He's not greedy or mean to people,'' she said, speaking through Sarn Vang and pausing to wipe the tears from her eyes.

There is, Yao Hang knows now, a difference between the dreams of America they had in Laos and life as the Mien people know it here.

They are all learning as fast as they can, but sometimes it is very hard.

``Everyone know that this is a freedom country and a safe country,'' he says, ``but when we are here, there are still many dangerous things. It is a shame.''

CUTLINE: FAHM FINH, MOTHER OF **NAI VANG SAETURN**, WEEPS WHEN SHE THINKS OF HER SLAIN SON

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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